DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 134 FL 021 616

AUTHOR Aydelott, John
TITLE Projects: Practical Applications for Teacher Training.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (7th, Cyprus, April 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Language Teachers; Masters Programs; *Methods Courses; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; *Student Projects; *Teacher Education; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *American University in Cairo (Egypt)

ABSTRACT

In the master's program in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course at the American University of Cairo (Egypt), student projects linking theory with classroom practice are used as a teacher training technique. The projects allow trainees to synthesize theoretical concepts, learn processes and develop materials they can use in later professional work, and use higher-level thinking skills. The two-course methodology sequence in which projects are used is designed around the projects. Development of the courses began with a list of project topics, arranged for a logical progression of skills and concepts used. Reading assignments, class discussion topics, and other in-class activities are determined by the way the projects can be debriefed best in class. Projects are both long- and short-term. Students also participate in project evaluation and preparation of a publication containing superior work. Suggestions for teacher trainers using the approach include: linking potential projects to course content and desired strategies in the course planning phase; identifying sample topics for students; communicating objectives and expectations; setting specific, feasible deadlines; and scheduling student debriefing sessions. Evaluation procedures and criteria must be considered carefully. A list of sample project topics, with descriptions, is appended. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John B. Aydelott

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL

ED 363 134

PROJECTS: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING

John Aydelott
The American University in Cairo

All too often graduate level courses for teachers promote theoretical background at the expense of practical application. It may be that the theory is seen as necessary to justify the existence of the graduate-level programs or it may be that some of the professors are inclined toward theory because they themselves have been out of the practical world for too long. In applied linguistics programs designed to train foreign language teachers, there is often the tendency to allow the theoretical linguistics courses to overshadow the methodology courses which can also be approached in a theoretical way. Many students in these theoretically heavy programs experience frustration because the purpose in learning many of the theoretical concepts is often not obvious and the students do not have opportunities to see how the concepts apply to the classroom.

Here at the American University in Cairo, I have worked to fill the practical gap in our theoretically heavy MA in TEFL program. In the two-course methodology sequence that I teach, I have tried several ways to respond to the students' frustration and needs. The way that I have found to be most successful is through the use of specially designed projects, designed to allow flexibility, individuality, and creativity and also to focus on the processes leading to useful products. I consider the two

FL021616

main strengths of project work at the graduate level to be (1) they allow students to synthesize the theoretical concepts they encounter in classroom presentations and readings and (2) through project work students learn processes (such as how to evaluate and select instructional materials, how to determine objectives for a lesson, how to put together a lesson plan, how to evaluate their own teaching performance, etc.) and develop products they can use later in their professional work.

The student evaluations of my last five MA TEFL courses indicate that the students almost unanimously see projects as the most beneficial activities of my courses, and not only do they think they have benefitted from the project work, but they also seem to like doing the projects. Therefore, I claim that projects provide meaningful and purposeful opportunities for students to put into practice many of the theoretical concepts they learn through readings and class presentations and, because they allow for flexibility and creativity, projects are motivating and fun to do. Projects allow students to work at their own pace, either individually or in small groups, and they allow students to employ their most effective learning strategies. They also expose students to concepts they might miss in the methods classroom but that are as valid for their professional development as any concepts addressed in their methods classes. Projects are also productive: students who engage in carefully designed projects learn processes for various

tasks that teachers are responsible for and, upon completion of their projects, the students have products which they can use later.

Assigning projects that relate to various concepts and skills in the syllabus is not enough; it is important to design an entire course around the projects. When I begin to put my syllabus together for a methods course, I start with a list of topics for projects (a list of projects that have proven successful in my teaching methods courses is at the end of the article) and then I sequence the projects so that there is a logical progression of skills or concepts and so that the work will be manageable both for the students and myself. Reading assignments, topics for class discussion, and other in-class activities are determined by the way the projects can best be debriefed in class. In this way, I can assign several short projects and a few longer projects throughout the semester; for almost each class meeting there is some aspect of a project to discuss in class. I incorporate these discussions and sharing sessions into my presentations.

An added bonus of having students work with projects is the opportunity to engage them in high-level thinking skills. Why not have the students themselves select the criteria for evaluating their projects, work out the grading scale, evaluate their own work, and select the best work for inclusion in a class-representative collaboration project? I have had my

students collaborate on the final phase of project work: after all the individual projects have been submitted, the students work together to evaluate and then select the best projects for inclusion in a spiral-bound, photocopied, in-house "publication" or a visual display. Requiring all written work to be done on a word processor facilitates the collation of book-like projects. It is remarkable how the selection and evaluation process instills competition and encourages high quality work while promoting bonding of the students in the class.

Project Guidelines

The following section of this article offers some guidelines in the form of steps for working with projects. These suggestions are intended to enhance project work. Although they have been prepared for and used with MA TEFL students, the steps should be applicable to any kind or level of teaching:

1) Determine how and how many projects will be used in the course. This is a major step because project work may not be the most effective teaching strategy for certain instructional concepts. Another part of this step is determining the evaluation weight of the projects, the evaluation criteria to be applied, and the expectations of the projects.

   Some important questions related to syllabus design include:

   - How many projects can be completed in the number of weeks in the semester?
   - How much class time will be needed to explain and debrief the projects, giving all students opportunities to describe their projects?

- How will the projects be evaluated (on the basis of effort, finished product, oral presentation, or a combination of these)?

2) **Identify several example topics.** Students need to have example topics so they can quickly and efficiently begin to focus their efforts and to visualize their final products. There should be enough examples so that students can use them as springboards for selecting topics that are relevant and meaningful for them individually. Depending upon the kind of project, students should have the opportunity to work individually or in small groups on topics of their choice and of relevance to course objectives.

Some important questions related to syllabus design include:

- What are the goals and objectives of the course?
- What are the most useful topics for the students?
- What topics for projects will develop the most useful processes and result in the most useful products?
- What are the resources available for completing the projects?
- Where will the work for the projects be done (in the library, in language classrooms, in an administrator's office, in the students' homes)?
- What personnel resources will need to be contacted to facilitate the projects?

3) **Communicate objectives and expectations.** Prepare a handout of explanations for each project; explain its purposes, objectives, expectations, and evaluation criteria and weight. For a long project, it might be necessary to prepare a handout for each phase of the project. Also communicate expectations of content, style, audience, and format to the extent possible. If possible, have some example projects on hand--not to take to class to display but to share with the few students who have problems visualizing the completed project.

Some important questions related to syllabus design include:

- What is the significance of the project to the course?
- What is the weight of the project grade in the course evaluation criteria?
- How does the project meet objectives/goals of the course and of the program?

4) **Set specific and feasible deadlines for the projects.** These deadlines must be feasible for students and instructors, and they should be strictly followed so that students and instructors are able to get the most out of the feedback process. If the projects are long, a reasonable due date for each phase should be set.

Some important questions for syllabus design include:

- How much time will be needed for students to complete the work of the projects and write up reports?
- How much time will be needed for providing constructive feedback for the students and for evaluating the projects?

5) **Schedule debriefing sessions.** Provide class time for all students to describe and/or defend their projects. This is probably the most useful part of project work. Students benefit from their own project work but they also benefit from hearing their classmates describe the processes they followed in making choices and carrying out the project design, and students benefit from hearing about the problems and difficulties their classmates had in completing their projects. My experience has led me to build these debriefing sessions into the project evaluation criteria and I have even, on several occasions, developed evaluation critique sheets so that students can participate in constructively criticizing each other's presentations and projects.

Some important questions for syllabus design include:

- Should students submit their written products before or after their debriefing sessions?
- How much class time should be used for the debriefing sessions?
- Should the projects be shared in visual displays and/or through oral explanations?
- Could outsiders (administrators, practicing teachers, students in other courses, etc.) be invited to attend the debriefing sessions?

Assessment Concerns

One problem that I have encountered with using projects in teacher training relates to evaluating student work. I have

experimented with two distinctly different approaches to assessing student work and I have found that there are drawbacks with each. Due to my experiments with the two approaches, I am more aware of the importance of developing and communicating assessment criteria, and I am careful to select an approach congruent with the objectives and design of individual projects.

In the first approach to assessing student work, I allow students to submit drafts for my feedback or to schedule conferences for discussing their projects. The final grade for the project reflects the quality of the final product. In this approach, the students work under my careful supervision; following my advice and suggestions, they have the opportunity to produce excellent results, according to my expectations. As is often the case, however, the final product shows as much evidence of my input as that of the student's creativity. This approach to assessing student work is congruent with the objective of creating final products which students can use in their future work. Some of the major drawbacks with this approach include:

1) the amount of my time required for providing continual feedback,
2) the lack of originality or creativity in the final products,
3) the difficulty in developing specific criteria to reflect quality and the amount of student work that goes into the final product, and

4) the possibility of all students receiving similar grades, despite varying degrees of effort.

In the other approach to assessing student work, I require the students to work on their own to develop their projects. I communicate my expectations and the assessment criteria through handouts. With little class time devoted to explanations and clarifications of expectations and without my continual supervision, students produce creative projects and have opportunities to experiment with processes which work best for them. The major drawback with this approach is the possibility that students will misinterpret expectations and produce inferior projects.

Summary

In summary, the major points of this article are that a way of dealing with the theoretical/practical frustrations of students preparing to be teachers, especially in graduate TEFL programs, is to design courses around projects so that students have the opportunity to select topics of their choice, employ creativity, work at their own rate, and use their individual and most effective learning strategies. Projects work best if guidelines, such as the ones included in this paper, are followed.

SAMPLE PROJECT TOPICS

- Interviews

Have students interview practicing FL teachers or administrators. The interviews should be guided to the extent necessary to meet course objectives, but there should be enough flexibility so that students can seek answers or reactions to their own concerns. The written reports should be reactions, not evaluations and the oral debriefings should focus on what was learned from the interviews. The reports can be compiled to form a collection of teacher profiles for future reference.

- File Projects

Have students collect and organize pictures, stories, or grammar exercises to form item banks or files. The method of organizing or referencing the items should be of more importance than the quality or number of items in the banks. When an open reference system is created so that items can be easily found and replaced for reuse, these projects result in very useful products that students can take with them into their future classrooms. The oral debriefings can be short explanations of the referencing systems with visual displays of the item banks.

- Resource Units

Have students select themes or topics that are of interest to them and would probably be of interest to their future students. Themes currently in the news or of popular importance make good resource unit themes. Have students collect authentic materials--at various levels of difficulty--to support their themes. Establish evaluation criteria such as relevance of the theme, amount of materials collected, presentation of the material (whether mounted, packaged neatly, quality of the photocopies, etc.), number and kinds of media used. Have students present their collections to the class on a "publishers' display" day. Resource units--only the collection of materials and not adaptation of them into exercises or activities--can be used as a first stage of the development of a unit plan, such as described in the next example project.

- Unit Plans

Have students prepare unit plans (a compilation of instructional materials and activities or exercises focusing on a particular theme or topic). These activities and exercises can be based on a the themes of their resource units--turning readings, listening passages, and video clippings into activities with supporting exercises. Some students will opt to create videos or listening tapes while others will prefer to write instructional materials or tests. Handouts listing expectations and evaluation criteria are absolutely necessary. Debriefing sessions for these projects can take the form of demonstrations, displays, and explanations.

- Teaching Observations

Have students observe several practicing teachers and write up their reactions to the observations. Specific guidelines and focus for each observation are necessary so that students do not waste time looking for something to record. I suggest a package of handouts, one handout for each observation, be prepared to explain a specific focus for each observation. A written report, at the end of the observations, describing use of facilities, comparing and contrasting teaching styles, reacting to classroom management techniques, etc., helps students develop an understanding of the complexities of teaching. The oral debriefings can focus on comparisons of teaching styles and on what was learned about teaching in general.

- Course Design

Have students design mini courses. Provide handouts profiling hypothetical learners, listing the goals and objectives, and indicating resources. Have students practice using curriculum theory and tryout their decision-making techniques. The debriefing sessions should focus on the processes students followed in constructing their mini courses and on the reasons for their design decisions.

- Culture Comparisons

Have students collect, analyze, illustrate, and present short examples and explanations of differences between cultures which can be used in the classroom for teaching culture. The written reports can contain descriptions and

explanations of the cultural concepts as well as suggested teaching techniques. The debriefing sessions can include processes for finding and analyzing the concepts.

- Article Summaries

Have each student summarize at least three different, recent, professional articles on the same topic. For the debriefing sessions have them draw comparisons or point out differences in perspectives in the articles.

- Staff Development Workshops

Have each student design a staff development workshop for practicing FL teachers. Students should justify the need for their topics, determine objectives and select the activities for the workshops, assemble materials to be used, and prepare instruments for participatory evaluation of the workshops. Debriefing sessions can focus on processes as well as explanations of the designs.

- Technique Papers

Have each student write up one or several techniques for teaching specific concepts or skills. Each technique paper should identify the proficiency of the projected learner, the objective/s of the technique, the time and materials required, and the process the teacher must follow to implement the technique. This particular kind of project works very well as a collaboration project: students read and critique each others' papers and select the best papers for inclusion in the class collaboration project. This project can also lead to the development of a useful product, a resource book of teaching ideas.